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Springfield nondiscrimination plan draws religious leaders, protesters

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. — A proposal to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations based on sexual orientation and gender identity drew an overflow crowd to a Springfield city council meeting, with testimony nearly evenly divided between opponents and supporters of the ordinance.

After hearing testimony for three hours from more than 60 people, the City Council ended debate and will take it up again in two weeks, when council members might vote on the issue, The Springfield News-Leader reported.

Opponents and supporters cited their religious beliefs and the potential impact on businesses for their views on the ordinance.

"This ordinance is about protecting against unlawful discrimination," said Andrew McIntyre, a gay man.



But Keith Bales, a youth pastor at Cherry Street Baptist Church, asked "Do we need to infringe on the rights of a major segment of our community in order to make this change?"

Speakers Lela Panagides and Michael Stout both said the ordinance would help Springfield businesses attract and retain talent by encouraging diversity.

But former councilman Nick Ibarra said government should not force business owners to violate their spiritual beliefs. If the ordinance is passed, he said, "What exactly is it the government cannot violate when it comes to our personal rights and beliefs?"

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